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Lifting Terror's Veil

John le Carre's newest thriller, "The Little Drummer Girl," explores the international terrorist's world with masterful suspense and intricacy of plot. But even a great novelist's skills can't equal the unbelievable real-world tale that has been unfolding around the man who tried to kill Pope John Paul II. As that plot spins on and on, with new revelations and new mysteries, more evidence piles up that there was a gifted author at work here too. The initials are KGB.

Indeed, the gunman himself, Mehmet Ali Agca, said so to the TV cameras last Friday in response to questions shouted to him while Italian police were escorting him from an interrogation session. "... in the attack against the pope even the KGB took part," he yelled in English.

The Italian police and press were particularly interested in Mr. Agca at that moment because of the kidnapping last month of Emanuela Orlandi, the 15-year-old daughter of a Vatican employee. A phone caller claiming to be the abductor had demanded that Mr. Agca be released. Mr. Agca, on the other hand, pleaded for the girl's freedom, saying he doesn't want to be released in exchange for Miss Orlandi. Perhaps prison has softened the man's heart. Or perhaps he has some other reason for not wanting to be outside those protective walls at the moment.

Mehmet's sensational charge was not the first time the KGB had been implicated in the plot against the pope. In March, it was reported in France that a defector from the Bulgarian secret service, one Jordan Mantarov, had told French intelligence agents that the KGB and the Bulgarian secret police collaborated on the enterprise. More recently and less specifically, an alleged Italian military intelligence report leaked to the Florence newspaper La Nazione quoted an Italian terrorist as saying that the KGB was "piloting" the activities of terrorists "in their anti-Western function."

The Russians, not unexpectedly, have been furious about all these slurs against their noble spy service. After the Agca declarations last Friday, Tass accused Western news agencies of playing into the hands of "ideological saboteurs." The Tass theory was that the CIA has sponsored the idea that East bloc spooks were behind the assassination attempt in St. Peter's Square.

This is a great compliment to the CIA's Rome station officers, who in the opinion of some observers have not particularly distinguished themselves in unraveling the mysteries of the shooting. But we doubt very much that the CIA could have contrived the violent and slanderous press attack that was being conducted against the pope in the Soviet Union shortly before he was shot. And it even seems unlikely that the CIA could have arranged for Mr. Agca to get his training at a PLO terrorism school in Syria or could have smuggled him out of a Turkish prison and into Bulgaria for the beginning stages of his leisurely journey to Rome. This plot is complex, but don't ask us to suspend all disbelief.

The tale continues to unfold. Judge Ilario Martella, who has been conducting the Italian investigation of the shooting of the pope, was invited to Sofia this week to pursue his inquiries. He was accompanied by Edmondo Patuto, chief of Interpol in Italy. The Bulgarians had offered to let the investigators talk to a Turk named Bekir Celenk, an alleged gun and drug smuggler now residing in Bulgaria, to check out allegations that he aided Agca. Will the Bulgarians try to trade Celenk for Sergei Antonov, a Bulgarian airline official the Italians have had in the cooler these last seven months? Certainly Sofia has been outraged over the detention of Antonov in connection with the shooting. We can't wait for the next chapter.

But meanwhile, an innocent girl remains in some villain's hands. None of the heavies in this drama have been discouraged, it appears, from continuing their nefarious work. Mr. le Carre's new book lifts the veil on incredible evil. But the true story unfolding in Europe shows that he has not nearly plumbed the depths of the depravity that exists in the minds of the masters of international terrorism.